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EDITOR'S PREFACE

WHEN Donald Hankey wrote these critical "notes" he had nothing more ambitious in his mind than their publication as a review in a friendly periodical. Various reasons prevented them seeing the light by that medium, and as his friends know that he believed his notes might help others who were suffering from the assaults of cheap rationalism upon their faith, as he himself had suffered, they think it a duty to make them available for the readers whom he had in his mind.

Such an explanation is necessary,

since it will readily be discovered that the little booklet has no pretensions to be, even in outline, a complete Christian apologetic. It is not for scholars, clerical or lay. It is designed for the plain man, working class or other, without specialised knowledge, the natural prey of rationalist writers and speakers, who falls an easy victim to arguments of unbelief which have no real value and are often easily demonstrated to be false The most familiar of these arguments are here dealt with in a very simple way, that the prey may at least be able to put up a defence.

The chapters were offered for serial publication to one of the newest of our religious periodicals with the original aims of which Donald was in sympathy. When it became clear that publication in that paper was

not intended, he tried to get the chapters back and was much disturbed by not succeeding. It is certain that he meant to revise the whole, perhaps to remodel and extend it and publish in a more ambitious form. Three months after his death the MS. was returned to his literary executor.

The original MS. has been carefully revised by a sympathetic hand; alterations have been made where necessary, and in several cases a line or two added to make the meaning more clear. This Preface has been written to warn off those who might from the title be led to expect a weightier work.

A. M.

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RELIGION AND COMMON SENSE

I

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

IN one of the early numbers of a recently published religious weekly I saw a full column advertisement of a book called *The Churches and Modern Thought.* The title took me back some seven years, to when I first came across it; and I remembered how the venerable priest to whom I spoke of it told me to pray for faith; and the university don marvelled that such a stupid

book could upset anyone; and how in spite of their remarks I remained for long very much upset indeed. And then I wondered how many readers of the book to-day could read it without being as upset as I was. And so I determined to read it again, and write some notes by way of reply to its general arguments.

My second reading found it a thoroughly unfair book, as so many books of the same class are, because it treats of all sorts of subjects of which the average man is entirely ignorant, and on which he is therefore unfitted to form a sound conclusion. It takes the average man out of his depth, and then hits him over the head with "authorities," and drowns him.

Yet such books would not be dangerous if we had a clearer idea of

what we believe, and why we believe it. It is our vagueness—often due to our laziness—which makes us so feeble and so easily upset. We have no clear, sharp ideas about the faith. We say one thing when we know that a scientist is listening, and something quite different when we are safe in the middle of a clergy school. We do not dare encourage people to think, and be strong and intelligent in their faith; instead, we try to attach them to the Church by giving them cheap billiards, or small positions of responsibility.

The sort of answer that this kind of book requires is simple teaching of the truths that matter, which make a difference to one's life. It is no good answering such a book word for word. However inaccurate and dishonest it may be, the average man

is not going to be able to sift the evidence, or to judge between the rival authorities. What does he know of "higher criticism" or "comparative mythology"? And if it is necessary that he should, in order to be able to retain his faith, be something of an expert in such matters, it would seem to indicate that Christianity had not long to live. But it is not necessary. The sting of such books is made dangerous by the fact that the Church so often teaches what is not true to her children. If Christians were taught the real faith—the faith which is able to make them free—such a book would have no power to harm them.

In the following chapters I shall not so much attempt to answer the arguments of a particular book as to deal with the type of "critical"

unbelief which it represents, and to show that, when once one has understood the real basis and nature of Christianity, such books are seen to be mostly beside the point. In effect their object will be to try and indicate what Christianity really is, by contrast to what such writers as the author of that book think it is.

II

MIRACLES, OR WHERE TO LOOK FOR GOD

THE materialist has got it firmly fixed in his mind that nature is an unintelligent, aimless, conscienceless process, going on from eternity to eternity in obedience to blind, remorseless laws. Consequently, if you speak to him of God, he immediately demands to be shown some "interference" with nature, which he agrees would prove the existence of some power besides the driving power of nature.

He knows, for instance, that five

loaves cannot, according to "natural law," fill five thousand stomachs and twelve baskets; and he will admit that if you can prove to him that Jesus performed such a miracle, that is a sign of the existence of divine power. "But," he will add, "I know quite well that you can prove nothing of the kind; because no nineteen-hundred-year-old evidence is going to convince me of anything of that sort."

This is unanswerable. It is no good arguing. But the fallacy is that it is in the miraculous that one must look for God. Jesus Himself condemned the people who demanded a "sign," and refused to give one. He taught that it was not outside nature, but in nature, and especially in the conscience and ideals of men, that one must look for the tracks of God.

"The kingdom of heaven is within you."

The miracles of the Bible cannot be proved, simply because they are miracles. The miracles that Jesus is said to have performed do not prove that He was the Son of God. Rather, if they are believed at all, it is the fact that we believe Jesus to have been the Son of God that makes it possible to believe them. They are only credible in so far as they are felt to fit in with our picture of Jesus.

Where we do find evidence of God is in man, and in human history. Again and again in the course of these chapters we shall have to insist that it is in man that we have the compelling evidence of God. Because men have souls, they cannot have sprung from a soulless nature, and

by "soul" we mean the power to think, to reason, to select, to plan, to love, to act disinterestedly, etc.

"Am I an atom in a soulless scheme,
My body real, but my soul a dream?
Ah yes, ah yes! But how explain the birth
Of dreams of soul upon a soulless earth?"

Writers who deny the existence of God are therefore obliged to call the soul an illusion. It is because this is such a poor solution of the difficulty that we are obliged to believe in God, and to see in the human soul the evidence of the divine.

It is in the unique history, and the unique religious ideas reflected in the Old Testament, and in the picture of a free, human personality which we get in the New Testament that we see most clearly the evidence of God's

existence and care for us. The miracles may come to be understood and appreciated later. At all events they are of quite secondary importance.

III

THE VALUE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

OUR modern unbeliever thinks nothing of the Old Testament, because the higher critics tell him that Deuteronomy was not written by Moses, and the geologists tell him that the world was not made in six days, and the anthropologists tell him that the story of Jonah and the whale is closely allied to the Solar Myth.

But of course that is to miss the whole point of the Old Testament, which is that it is the literature of a

real people with a unique religion, whose story, when read with the assistance of the higher critics, almost amounts to a proof of the providential ordering of history. Of course, all of the events recorded there do not fit into our conception of how things should be. It is easy—and foolish, although common—for unbelievers to ask, "Is it likely that a good God, etc.?" but it is no argument. And if it cannot be maintained that any of us have a right to beg the question in that style, we are no better than petulant children if we refuse the knowledge of Himself that God does give us, because it is incomplete, and does not come in the exact form that we should like. The fact that such writers and speakers think that, if there is a good God He must be a bungler, only emphasises the

intellectual vanity that is at the bottom of all their thinking. "God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few." That is Jewish, but the profoundest wisdom of the world cannot go beyond it.

Before the rise of Christianity there was one religion in the Roman Empire which was unique; it was Judaism. Judaism was unique in the following particulars:

It preached One God, denied the existence of all others, and refused to regard them with tolerance.

It had no images of God.

It had no mythology of minor deities.

It commended justice and purity and mercy as the surest way of gaining God's favour.

To say the least, it is remarkable

that of all the nations in the Empire which had religions of their own, this little Semitic tribe should be the only one to have a faith so free from superstition, and so ethically sound. It was Renan who said that the Jews had "a genius for religion"; it is certainly interesting to ask how they got this unique religion.

They did not get it all in a moment. It evolved from very primitive conceptions in the course of a chequered history which was, however, very much like that of their neighbours. The history of this evolution is given in the Old Testament, as read by the critics.

Moses, according to our typical critic, is not a historical character; but, be that as it may, some fellow, who lived about the time that he is said to have lived, persuaded some

desert tribes of Semitic stock to combine under the rule of a God named Jehovah, or "Yaveh" as the moderns spell it, and to invade Canaan At that time the Israelites—for so the tribes were called—were probably not monotheists. They believed in Yaveh, just as the Moabites believed in Chemosh and the Ammonites in Moloch, as their own national God, but not as the God of all mankind (cf. Judg. xi. 24). But already there was a difference between the relations of the Israelites to Yaveh, and those of other tribes to their gods—a differ ence that was destined to have the most far-reaching effects.

In the case of the ordinary Semitic tribe, the relations between them and their god were mutually advantageous. The god was either thought of as bound to the tribe by blood ties, or

else limited to a certain area of ground, which they occupied. In the former case the god could not be the god of any other nation, and in the latter he could not be the god of any other place. In both cases he was dependent on the tribe for honour and worship and gifts. But Yaveh was not bound to the Israelites by any tie but His own free will. He had chosen them; they had not chosen Him. They were dependent on Him, but He was not dependent on them. Moreover, Yaveh did not demand sacrifice as the condition of His favour so much as sole loyalty to Himself, and mutual loyalty and justice among the members of His chosen people. The two great offences were to sacrifice to other gods, and to betray a brother Israelite.

It is true that after their arrival in Canaan the Israelites borrowed a good many ideas from the other Semitic peoples already established there, and that Solomon and the kings of Samaria especially were guilty of worshipping Yaveh just as if He were one of the many other gods; but a continual stream of prophets denounced this tendency, and kept alive the ancient "Mosaic" tradition that Yaveh was "a jealous God," and that He demanded "mercy and not sacrifice" (see especially Amos v. 20-26 and Jer. vii. 22 and 23).

By the time of Isaiah the difference between Yaveh and other gods had become so evident to the prophets that they proclaimed Him the God of all the world, the only true God. They spoke of Him as controlling the destinies of other nations besides

the Israelites, as when Isaiah cries, "Ho Assyrian, rod of mine anger" (x. 5). The "jealousy" of Yaveh had led to monotheism!

When the Israelites, among other tribes, were deported by the Assyrians and Babylonians to other countries, some of them were monotheists, and some were not. Those who were not, admitted that Yaveh had proved less powerful than they had hoped, and proceeded to worship the gods of their place of exile. They became "the lost tribes." Those who were monotheists, and believed that they alone of all the nations of the earth were worshippers of the one true God, were convinced that they still had a mighty future before them, and survived to return to Jerusalem, and kept their distinct nationality (cf. 2 Kings xvii. 27).

The monotheistic character of Judaism was therefore fully and finally established by the time of the restoration, and in the years of trouble which followed led the Jews to be intensely exclusive in their relations with other peoples. No religion is so free from foreign influences as the Jewish. It remained unique among the religions of the world, because the Jews were so convinced of its rational and moral superiority to all others. And so the way was paved for Christianity, a religion no less unique; but with a far wider appeal, far more true to the facts of life.

This history, showing how the "jealousy" of Yaveh led to the doctrine of monotheism, and how the mutual loyalty that Yaveh demanded from the members of His

chosen people blossomed into the doctrine of the brotherhood of men under the fatherhood of God is extraordinarily interesting. Our modern unbeliever sees in it an entertaining illustration of the power of heredity and environment to create illusions in the human brain People with less certainty of their wisdom will see in it an illustration of the revelation of God in history.

In the course of this amazing evolution the Old Testament was produced; and although the ordinary reader will not, perhaps, be able to appreciate without help its historical significance, he will, as he learns his way about it, find it an inexhaustible store of inspiration and comfort in the troubles of life. There is much in it which is in conflict with the highest teaching of to-day, and not a little of

it that for the ordinary reader is without edification; but the man who reads it, and marks it with a pencil, will soon discover the riches that it contains.

IV

THE VALUE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

THE man who missed the significance of the Old Testament naturally misses the meaning and value of the New Testament. He thinks nothing of the Gospels because of the miracles. He thinks that we know very little about Jesus, and that it is even arguable that there never was such a person. The Gospels were written such a long time after the events which they profess to describe, and contain so many suspicious features, that they cannot be relied on.

St. Paul very likely wrote none of the Epistles attributed to him, and even if he did, he betrays an amazing ignorance of the life and teaching of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels. And so on and so forth!

Now in dealing with these startling assertions we must be quite clear what it is that we want to get out of the New Testament. We have already referred briefly to the miracles. They are not of quite the first importance that unbelieving writers think them. What we require from the Gospels is a picture of Jesus which shall make us feel that we know what manner of man He was. If in the Gospels we get a living picture of a man with definite characteristics, and if those characteristics amount to the perfection of spiritual freedom, and if we can trace that freedom to its

underlying cause, that is all we require from the Gospels as a foundation of Christianity. We believe that in the first three Gospels there is exactly what we want, and in the next chapter we shall try to set down what we feel to be the salient features of the Master whose life and teaching they portray, and to trace His greatness to its underlying cause. The greatness of Jesus lies, as we believe, in His freedom from all the evil that enslaves other men; and the underlying cause is His unique sense of, and trust in God.

Then from the Epistles we want to know that other people came to share that sense and love of God in a minor degree, through their faith in Jesus; and that in due measure it produced the same sort of results in them. If we find evidence of this in the Epis-

tles, and it is borne out by our own experience, or by that of those whom we know, Christianity is established for us.

But first a word about criticism and its results.

First with regard to the Gospels, the critics have discovered that two of our Gospels—Matthew and Luke—are not original documents That is to say, they are compiled from earlier documents, of which one was our Mark, and another a collection of the sayings of Jesus. It is commonly agreed that Mark was written within forty years of the Crucifixion, by one of the second generation of disciples. Most probably it was written by John Mark, who was the companion of Barnabas, Paul, and probably Peter, who had lived at Jerusalem at the time of the Crucifixion, and whose

mother's house was a centre where the apostles used to meet.

The other document, the sayings of Jesus, is sometimes thought to be the "Oracles of the Lord" which Matthew is said to have written, and is commonly held to be of the highest authority, and to have been written between ten and twenty years after the Crucifixion. It is not true to say that Luke did not write the Gospel called by his name, or the Acts. The indications are that he did.

There are other sources used in Matthew and Luke which are held to be of various value. The stories in Matthew about the birth and death of Jesus are commonly held to be late and legendary. Those in Luke are certainly early, though opinions vary as to their value The important thing to realise is that the Gospels do

not hang together. That is to say, that if one thinks there is good reason to doubt the story of the flight into Egypt, or even the whole story of the virgin birth, that is no reason for doubting the authenticity of the Ser mon on the Mount, because they come from different documents, which were transcribed in their original form.

It is generally admitted that John was written after the other Gospels, and is more of a sermon on the incarnation than a history of Jesus; but the question whether or no it was written by John the son of Zebedee is still an open one.

To say that the Epistles of Paul were not written by him as our modern unbelieving critic asserts, is, as a generalisation even, not true. It is generally admitted that he certainly wrote Romans, Corinthians,

and Galatians, and most probably he wrote all the others called by his name except Hebrews. It is simply nonsense to say that Paul shows ignorance of the teaching and life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. The Epistles were not written to display knowledge of the gospel story, which had been conveyed by word of mouth; but to decide particular difficulties which had arisen, to warn and to exhort.

But two things stand out in them. The first is that St. Paul's general attitude was an adaptation to his circumstances of that of Jesus. Jesus claimed that He fulfilled the law. He abrogated it by fulfilling its intention. To Jesus the law had become unnecessary, because He was in the closest touch with God the Father, and the law was simply intended as a help to bring men into touch with

God. St. Paul said that the law was a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. For him too the law was abrogated, and fulfilled, because through faith in Christ he had got into touch with God, and having the love of God within him, had a guide which was better than the law. What Paul calls faith, and John calls love, is simply the sense and trust of God which had possessed the Master, reproduced in the disciple. In addition to that, the Epistles abound with phrases and ideas which are echoes and often quotations from the teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels.

The following list of such reminiscences of the Gospel in the single Epistle to the Romans is suggestive: i. 16 (Mark viii. 38), ii. 1 (Matt. vii. 1-5), ii. 6 (Matt. xvi. 27), ii. 19 (Matt. xv. 14), v. 3 (Matt. v. 11),

vii. 3 (Matt. v. 32), vii. 6 (Matt. xv. 6), ix. 32 (Matt. xxi. 42), x. 4 (Matt. v. 11), x. 9 (Matt. x. 32), xi. 8 (Matt. xiii. 14), xii. 14 ff. (Matt. v. 43 ff.), xiii. 7 (Matt. xxii. 21), xiv. 9 (Matt. xxii. 32), xiv. 10 (Matt. vii. 1-5), xiv. 12 (Matt. xii. 36), xiv. 13 (Matt. xviii. 6), xiv. 17 (Matt. vii. 21), xiv. 20 (Matt. xv. 11). All these breathe the spirit of the Gospels, and often reproduce the actual words. They form sufficient answer to the statement as to the Pauline authorship of the Epistles, which like many other statements are as untrue as they are dogmatic.

Summary.—Therefore the criticism of the Gospels, far from destroying their value, merely makes them more intelligible and more elastic. They were compiled from documents which undoubtedly give us a true pic-

ture of Jesus and His teaching, while on the other hand they were reduced to their present form at a sufficient time after the events recorded for us to be able to use them intelligently and not slavishly. The author of *The Churches and Modern Thought* wants to use the Bible slavishly or not at all, and feels that if God were going to reveal Himself through a human life, He ought not only to have sent an infallible biographer, but also an infallible portrait painter, to preserve the revelation.

Had the revelation of God in the person of Jesus ended at His death, instead of only beginning, there might have been some show of reason in this contention. But God does not act in that mechanical way. As it is, we get a good enough idea in the Gospels of the person of Jesus as He was to

enable us to know Him and love Him as He is; while if the Gospels were any more accurate and infallible than they are, there would be grave danger that we should exchange the knowledge of the living Lord for the picture, and Christianity would become a dead worship of a book, as Judaism did before it.

V

THE FREEDOM OF JESUS, OR GOD FOUND

WE have said that it is in the "spiritual" part of a man that we have the surest indication of the existence of God. It is the presence in men of conscience, reason, choice, purpose, love, etc., which makes it necessary and possible to think that such faculties must also exist in man's Creator.

Spirituality shows itself in freedom from the forces of heredity and environment, in freedom to work out the ideals which the reason and

conscience and the nobler affections join in forming. It is in the man who is most free to carry out what he believes to be best, and what the common conscience of mankind re cognises as the best way of life, that we see the most of God; and the man who is perfectly free would be the fullest possible revelation of God to men. The question is whether in the Gospels we get a picture of a man who satisfies to the full our highest ideals for human life and character. If so, they give us a true basis for the Christian religion.

Fear, whether moral or physical, is one of the most contemptible and common of human failings. Yet Jesus seems to have been completely free from it. He was not afraid to stand out against the Pharisees and priests, and all the chief personages

of His time. Nor was He afraid to stand out against the masses. The important people wanted Him to keep quiet, and the masses wanted Him to proclaim Himself the Messiah and lead them in a holy war. Jesus wanted to persuade people that the only thing in life really worth having was the single-minded purity of heart, and the unselfish and unboastful love that comes from believing in and loving the good God and Father.

He was not afraid to incur the hatred of the hypocrites in high places whom He denounced, nor to lose the support of the mob whose hopes He disappointed; He went on His way in complete freedom and independence, and was not dismayed when it became evident that it was leading to the cross. He did not fear men

because He trusted God; He did not fear death because He believed in eternal life.

We find the same freedom from fear in Peter, and resting upon the same ground, when he says to the priests, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts v. 29); and in Paul when he writes, "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Rom. viii. 31).

The perfect faith of Jesus also involved freedom from all the pride and sensitiveness and desire for personal popularity or position or wealth which so often enslaves men, and which led the Buddha to teach that the "Illusion" of selfhood was the source of all evil. His mind was too full of the greatness of God to be occupied with class pride or social prejudice; while His faith was such

as to make Him indifferent to the immediate results of His work. We read that He was content to trust that His death would accomplish the coming of the kingdom with power, since His life had failed to do so.

Convention and tradition exercised no dominion over Him, for His faith led Him to trust His instinct in all matters of morality and belief; and others shared that confidence, with the result that the conscience of Jesus became for His disciples an authority higher even than the law, which they had been taught to believe that God Himself had given to Moses.

He was not the slave of any artificial philosophy. He was not reduced to calling the greatest seeming realities of life illusions, like the Buddha or the Brahmins. His faith in God as Father and Creator en-

abled Him to accept what seemed good and wholesome as being good and wholesome, and what seemed bad and harmful as being bad and harmful. He taught men to trust the guides that God had given them, their consciences and reasons and ideals, and to believe in their ability, through God's help, to accomplish what good designs they were led to form.

We find that to Jesus the union of the sexes seemed a holy partnership—indeed, a partnership with God in His work of creation. For Himself there was no such union. "Fashioned in form as a man," He was without passion, and the unclouded vision of God, which He enjoyed, was the direct outcome of the purity of heart from which came His marvellous serenity.

Jesus, in spite of His vision of God, and His clear sense of having been called, does not seem to have been in any way fanatical. He was apparently perfectly humble, the friend of all kinds of men and women, joining with them in their ordinary festivities. His teaching, according to the first three Gospels, was full of sane common sense and humour; and shows no signs of fanaticism or monomania. There is evidence that the disciples tried to weave a web of mystery and wonder about Him; but Jesus always seems to have brought them to earth again with words of warning and reproof.

Though He loved to retire by Himself to pray, it was always that He might return to work refreshed.

Like all men Jesus was liable to the temptation to doubt. He lived by

subjective knowledge of God, not objective; by trusting the spiritual, not by the evidence of the senses. He did not see God with His eyes, nor hear Him with His ears.

No sooner did He receive the revelation of His divine Sonship at His baptism than He was tempted to doubt it, and to demand an objective sign. "If thou art the Son of God . . ." whispered the tempter. At His betrayal He shrank from the ordeal before Him, and yet at His trial before Caiaphas He made the supreme confession of His faith. On the cross it was still possible that He had trusted in vain, and the suffering body cried out that it was so. Yet the words with which He voiced His agony are from the beginning of a psalm of agony that ends in triumph; and, if Luke is

to be believed, His last words were, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

In this picture of the nobility of perfect freedom we Christians find the basis of our faith. Surely such a revelation is worthy of a God who desires the loving trust of children, rather than the fear or cupboard love of slaves.

VI

THE LIVING JESUS, OUR LORD

WE have given our reasons for disagreeing with the writers who deny the authenticity of the Gospels and who call the story of Jesus "legend." We must now go on to show why we disagree with them when they call the belief in the living Jesus "hallucination."

Of course the belief started with what such writers call the "legend" of the resurrection. Granting that we cannot establish by historical proof the details of the gospel story, and indeed, such a story cannot, by

reason of its wonder, be established on purely historical grounds, what do we know for certain about the matter? Just this, that the disciples of Jesus ran away when He was betrayed, and made no attempt to save Him; and that a couple of months after He was safely crucified, and, as His enemies thought, finished with, they were preaching that He was risen to an eternal life, and could not be deterred from preaching.

What Jesus had prophesied had come to pass. His death, and what happened afterwards, had done what His life had failed to do—brought the kingdom of God to men with power. Well, what did happen afterwards? What was the effective cause of this change in the disciples? Our critic, for example, says nothing in particular—hallucination, self-de-

ception, imagination, nerves . . : Peter said it was the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead, and that they had seen Him, and received the gift of the Holy Spirit, which had made new men of them. Choose which explanation you like.

A point of interest is that this "hallucination" of the disciple is exactly like the "hallucination" of his Master. Jesus thought that He was the Son of God, and that God His Father gave Him wisdom and power and purity and goodness. And lo! He had them! Peter and Paul thought that they had received the Holy Spirit which would give them courage and power to do their work in the world. And lo! They did it! We have to admit that where faith is strong it is mightily effective for good.

And after all, is it so irrational and absurd to trust the spiritual—the subjective? It is easy to say that what isn't matter doesn't matter, and that nothing is real but the physical. And yet every time we try to influence our characters and destinies we are showing a practical belief in a power or faculty which the materialist is obliged to condemn as an illusion. Every time we praise or blame another man, or try to rouse him to effort against vice or temptation, we are trusting the spiritual and, according to the materialist, acting irrationally.

It is unfortunately true that Christians by no means live up to the creed that they profess. It is not easy to embody Jesus. But when one does meet the really Christ-like man, the man who has strength

tempered by love, and faith with humility and humour, he is the best that can be. And so, though we may grant that faith may be hallucination, and the spirit may be illusion, we can afford to run the risk because of the solid benefits that ensue. On the other hand, we cannot afford to run the risk of losing the best things in life, because our belief in them may be illusion. It was the teaching of Jesus that we must take the risk. "He that would find his life shall lose it."

VII

NOTES ON COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGY

IN the book which supplied the basis for this simple Apologetic by a layman there is a chapter of some 15,000 words on this subject, in which the author tries to show that the teaching and the incidents in the life of Christ, and the chief doctrines and rites of the Church are none of them original, but all paralleled in, if not borrowed from, other religions.

The charge is an old one; it has often been adequately answered by scholars, but somehow its errors and

exaggerations are never scotched; and so they are constantly startling the unwary, ignorant, and credulous reader. In the case of *The Churches and Modern Thought* it is the worst and least honest chapter in the book. It is bad because it displays all through a complete failure to realise the nature of Christianity either actually or historically; it is disingenuous because it is full of statements on subjects of which the ordinary reader is quite ignorant, which statements are drawn from worthless and inaccurate sources, and bolstered up with the names of "authorities" with whose works the writer shows he has had no first-hand acquaintance. In this chapter we shall try to show shortly why, even if the facts were correct, the author's remarks are mostly beside the point;

and in the next chapter we shall try to show equally shortly that his "facts" are mainly fictions, or distortions of the truth.

The objects of the attack may be roughly divided into (*a*) incidents in the gospel story; (*b*) the teaching and sinlessness of Jesus; and (*c*) Church doctrine and practice.

Incidents in the gospel story.—The incidents in the gospel story which are attacked are chiefly the stories connected with the birth and miracles of Jesus. "Parallels" are adduced from Buddhism, Hinduism, Mithraism, the ancient religion of Mexico, and other sources, to show that the stories of the Slaughter of the Innocents, the Virgin Birth, the Adoration of the Shepherds, the Temptation, etc., were most probably adaptations from the stories of previous "gods,"

saints, and teachers, or at the best the kind of story that always is invented about great heroes of antiquity when they are dead.

As a matter of fact, most of the alleged "parallels" are absurd; but even if they were not, it need not trouble us. In any case, these stories are merely embellishments of the gospel story, whether true or not. They are not evidences of Christianity; they are not, from the literary point of view, bound up with the rest of the Gospels, for they are declared by critics to be derived from different sources from the bulk of the Gospels. Take them away, and Christianity is still left. It is merely robbed of some jewellery, which many consider to be meretricious and unbecoming.

The Teaching of Jesus, and His sinlessness.—Our modern "agnostic"

would have us believe that the teaching attributed to Jesus is just like the teaching of any other saint or moralist. In this theory there is a superficial truth and a fundamental fallacy. It is perfectly true that nearly all thoughtful and holy men have been and are agreed that certain actions and states of mind are good, and others bad. Unselfishness, generosity, courage, humility, and purity, for instance, are commonly agreed to be good; meanness, cant, fear, passion, bestiality are as universally recognised to be bad. If Jesus had done no more than to set the seal of His approval on our ideas of what is good and bad, He could not claim any originality.

But that which makes Jesus original—and for that matter makes the Buddha, and the Brahmins, and

Mrs. Eddy, and lots of other teachers original—is that they all recognise that it is hopeless to attempt to be good by making a series of disconnected efforts to do the right thing when temptation to do the opposite arises; they all recognise that in order to be good one has got to have a point of view, a theory of life, a condition of mind which will automatically produce the right solution of each problem as it arises. The reason why Jesus is different from other teachers is that He gives a different, and a more natural, explanation of why certain things are good, and others bad; and because He gives a different picture of the right point of view from which to regard life. Similarly, the question of His "sinlessness" is not to be settled by a critical inquiry into each separate

incident recorded of Him, but by asking whether He seems to have been able to adopt the point of view which He recommended to others, and if so, whether the results were satisfactory.

Jesus, Krishna, and the Buddha.—As to the alleged similarity between Krishna and Jesus on the idea of goodness the following quotation is a typical example: "Let a man, if seeking God by deep abstraction, abandon his possessions and his hopes, and betake himself to some secluded spot, and fix his heart and thoughts on God alone." Here we have (1) the common ground—the recognition that worldly riches and rewards are not worth the price paid for them, and that it is the eternal riches of God which really matter But (2) we have the expression of

the foundation doctrine of the Brahmins, which is wholly at variance with that of Christ. The Brahmins hold that the material world is an illusion, and that the way of salvation is to withdraw from contact with it, and to try and become obsessed with the thought of God. The Christian theory is that the world is a school to prepare men for a wider life. Holiness and strength of character are to be gained by loving and helping other men, by enduring suffering, and fighting evil with faith. The fundamental doctrine of Jesus was that God is the Father, and that once a man has really grasped that he will be able to see everything else in its right proportion, and to meet every problem of life with courage and profit. Abandonment of wealth is only recommended when wealth

obscures a man's vision of God; and withdrawal to solitary prayer is only advised as a preparation for a return to active life. As a matter of fact, no words could have been chosen which would better illustrate the difference between them!

But there remains the Buddha. Jesus and the Buddha both taught unselfishness. But whereas the Buddha taught the artificial doctrine that the personality of a man was an illusion, and that this illusion was the source of all evil, Jesus taught the natural doctrine that a man's personality was the best thing he had, and that it made him capable of being a loving son to a loving Father in heaven, and a loving and loyal brother to his fellow-men. Such "parallels" may arouse "grave suspicions" in prejudiced minds about

the truth of Christianity. They arouse "grave suspicions" in mine as to the fitness of agnostics of this class to write about Christianity!

VIII

COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGY
(*continued*)

IN the last chapter we dealt with recent attacks on the originality of certain incidents in the gospel narrative, and on the teaching and character of Jesus—on the assumption that the facts were correct. In the present chapter we must deal, on the same assumption, with the attacks on Christian doctrines and rites. The three most important doctrines that are generally attacked are the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the Resurrection; the most important rite

that is attacked is that of Holy Communion.

The Incarnation.—The critic points out that in several ancient religions the necessity was felt for some link between men and God. For instance, the Græco-Roman demigods were divine men, and to some extent "incarnations" of deity.

There is indeed some truth in this statement; but it is certainly not an argument against Christianity. Two facts lie at the root of all religion—(1) that men are partly spiritual, and therefore compelled to imagine the existence of a God or gods; (2) that men can only receive impressions and find expression of their thoughts through their bodies. It follows that religion, or men's thoughts about God, can only become articulate if God is revealed to men in terms of human

life. An incarnation is the only possible sound basis for a religion which is to be something more than sentiment and guesswork, and it is natural enough that thoughtful men should have realised it long ago. Christianity is based on the idea that in Jesus God revealed Himself to men in so far as He could be so revealed. If God wants us to have a religion it is impossible to imagine how else He could have given us a true one. Christianity is thus based on what had long been recognised as the only possible basis for real religion.

In every other respect the Christian incarnation differs from those of contemporary religions. This difference was fully realised by the early Christians, though not by their opponents. The pagans of the Roman Empire

were quite willing to let Jesus have a place among the numerous demi-gods of their pantheon, and were utterly unable to understand the Christians' obstinate refusal to accept their offer. If the Christian incarnation had been, as has been suggested, borrowed from pagan ideas, this refusal would have been incomprehensible; but as it is, the refusal proves that the suggestion has no real foundation.

The Atonement.—In several Oriental religions the idea is found of a demi-god saving his adherents by freeing the spirit from the bondage of the flesh. This was the root idea, apparently, of most of the "mystery religions." God was thought of as pure spirit, and men as partly spirit and partly flesh. Salvation consisted in setting the spirit free from the flesh.

This was supposed to be accomplished in some cases by abusing the flesh—religious immorality—and in others by starving it—religious asceticism and chastity. In Christianity we have the novel idea, which when understood is such a sensible idea, of the spirit gaining strength by controlling the body, and using it for right and natural purposes. In some cases, especially in the case of religions founded on Sun worship, there occurs the idea of a god dying and rising again for the salvation of men. But here again we have practical experience forcing people to recognise fundamental facts, and to invent symbols for them in their mythologies.

The author of Isaiah, chapter liii. is an example of a man forced by experience to recognise the great principle that the sufferings of the

innocent are often the salvation of the guilty. That this fundamental fact of life should be embodied in Christianity is no argument against Christianity. In fact, we may assert that if it were not so embodied Christianity would be inadequate as a universal religion. That the principle should have been recognised in pagan mythologies is simply an additional demonstration of how essential it is. The doctrine of the Atonement, like that of the Incarnation, is a necessary element in religion That Jesus suffered, and that through His sufferings His disciples gain power; that He rose from the dead, and that His disciples hope for eternal life, are features which help to make Christianity a real power in life. That others should have recognised the necessity for such

features in religion is no argument against the likelihood of their occurring in the true religion given by God to men.

The Resurrection.—It is suggested that the story of Jesus rising again the third day is fiction based on the story of Jonah and the whale, which in turn is fiction based on "the Solar Myth." The Solar Myth, which appears in many ancient religions, is the story of a sun-god dying and rising again. Jonah, however, was not a sun-god; and the story of the resurrection of Jesus is not based on Jonah's adventures in the whale! There is a reference to Jonah in the Gospels, which is presumably the foundation of this theory; but it appears in two forms, of which the earlier and more authentic (according to all critics) is that of Luke xi. 30. In

Luke, Jesus says that no sign shall be given to His generation but the sign of the prophet Jonah, and explains it by pointing out that whereas the Ninevites repented at the preaching of Jonah, the Jews will not repent at the preaching of Himself. It is the prophetic denunciation of sin which is the "sign." Matthew, however, put a new construction on the passage, and read into it a reference to the Resurrection. But the reference is obviously forced, if only because "whereas Jonas was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale" (Matt. xii. 40), Jesus was only two nights and one day "in the heart of the earth"—that is, according to the gospel. If the "third-day resurrection" had been invented in connection with Jonah, presumably Jesus would have been

alleged to have risen on Monday evening.

Holy Communion.—Mithraism had a "mystery," in which the symbols were a wafer marked with two crossed lines, and a cup of water. That Holy Communion should have been "cribbed" from this is an idea too fanciful to be worth discussing. The partaking of a common meal in token of mutual loyalty was quite a recognised custom in ancient times, and this is undoubtedly the reason why Jesus chose that form of rite for binding His disciples to Him at the moment of His departure from them. The choice of bread and wine, as symbolising His body and blood, endowed the rite with a peculiar character, the appropriateness of which was recognised as soon as "the gift of the Holy Spirit" had made the apostles

realise that they were to try and embody Jesus.

A general remark.—In all books such as the one to which we have been referring so often, a root defect is that the writers all appear to regard themselves as capable of sketching out the plans of God with the world if there had been a God. Thus they are ready to say that God ought to have ignored all previous human aspiration in giving His self-revelation. He ought not to have met men half-way as He actually has done. They can see no half-way house between claiming absolute originality for every detail of the form of God's self-revelation, and granting the sanction of Christianity to every previous effort of the human mind to seek God, however great a mixture of truth and fantasy it may contain.

But surely the Christian theory that in all men's searches for God there was a measure of success, and a measure of failure, and that every guess at truth finds its fulfilment in Christianity, while every false idea is destined to perish eventually, even if it has not done so already, is the natural and rational explanation of the **Phenomena of Comparative Religion.**

IX

COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGY: FINAL REMARKS

HITHERTO we have assumed that the "parallels" which our typical modern "agnostic" adduces are well founded on careful first-hand study of the best authorities. But, alas, it is a vain assumption! Such an air of regretful honesty, such confident dogmatism, such professions of a love of truth for its own sake may well have led us astray, as no doubt they were intended to do. When I first read *The Churches and Modern Thought*, I accepted the

author's good faith and authorities unquestioningly. But when I read Cumont's book on Mithraism, which appeared to be the most impartial and scientific authority on the subject, my doubts were aroused. Therefore my own remarks will be confined to this branch of the subject. But anyone who wants to read the criticism of other branches should buy Howard Nash's *Pagan Christs*, which reveals the fact that the greater proportion of *The Churches and Modern Thought* "facts" were taken wholesale, and without verification from a worthless American work, which is a deliberate distortion of the real authorities. The "higher criticism" of that work is thus both amusing and instructive, and the "grave suspicions" that it arouses of honesty or intelligence of the author are

. . well, graver than the gravest of his about Christianity !

Mithraism.—Most of his impressive "facts" about Mithraism seem to be taken from J. M. Robertson. This latter gentleman is doubtless honest; but it is doubtful whether he has a sense of humour since the following are among the "parallels" which he adduces between Mithraism and Christianity:

(1) Mithras evolved from a *rock* as a full-blown man in a Phrygian cap. Jesus was born a baby, of a human mother, in a stable which is said by Justin Martyr and Origen(!) to have been a *rock* cave. Peter in his Epistle talks about Christians being built as *"living stones"* into Christ.

(2) Shepherds saw Mithras arising from the rock, and adored him. Shepherds are said to have adored

the infant Jesus. (Incidentally, as it was a little while afterwards that Mithras created the first human couple, it is uncertain who the shepherds were.)

(3) Mithras was one of a host of demigods, supposed to bridge the gulf between God and man. Jesus is supposed to have embodied the will of God, and revealed Him to men.

(4) Several of the Twelve Apostles were fishermen. There were twelve signs of Zodiac, one of which was "Aquarius"—incidentally, there were also twelve tribes of Israel!

(5) Mithraism had rites connected with the "Solar Myth," and the dying and rising of the sun-god. Christians believed that Jesus died and rose again.

(6) The Mithraists had a ritual

meal in which a wafer marked with crossed lines and a cup of water figured. It is supposed to have something to do with the slaying of a bull by Mithras, but the exact meaning is lost. The Christians had a meal of bread and wine which symbolised the embodiment of Jesus by His Church.

(7) Mithras is to judge the dead, and so is Jesus.

(8) **C**hristmas Day is on the same date as a Mithraic feast.

Of these "parallels" all but the last two are surely palpably absurd. The date of Christmas Day very likely was fixed for convenience on a date which was already a festival It was not one of the original feast days of the Church. So the only real parallel is number **seven**; which proves nothing.

Facts about Mithraism not mentioned by our agnostic.—Mithraism was a part of the ancient religion of Persia, of which Professor Cumont writes, "One must lay to the charge of the Persian mysteries the serious reproach of having condoned, perhaps even promoted (*enseigné*), all superstitions." He also says, "Mithra was accompanied on his migrations by a great part of the Mazdean Pantheon." Of these other gods the rest were cheerfully identified with those of Greece and Rome Thus "Time"—originally nameless—was identified with Saturn, "Heaven" with Jupiter, "Earth" with Juno, "Ocean" with Neptune, Haoma with Bacchus, Atar with Vulcan, etc., etc. Mithras himself was god of the upper air. After he came to earth he fought and conquered the sun-god, who became his

friend, and to whom he gave the torch with which to dispel the darkness. Then he slew a bull, from whose blood arose plants, useful animals, and the first human couple. They demanded water, which he obtained by shooting an arrow at a rock. Then he and the sun-god returned to heaven and had a feast. He is the god of truth and courage and morality.

Such is the legend of Mithras, upon whose life and work it is gravely suggested that some of the most distinctive features of Christianity were built! As to the explanations of the extinction of Mithraism and the survival of Christianity it is put forward that the vulgarity of the carpenter was better suited to the low level of intelligence prevalent in the dying years of the Empire than the loftier

symbolism of Mithraism! As a matter of fact, however, Christianity was defined long before Mithraism had any hold on the Roman Empire at all; and the obvious reason why Christianity survived when Mithraism fell was that Christianity was based on history and experience, while Mithraism was based on mythology; Christianity was rational and intelligible, while Mithraism was fanciful and mysterious; Christianity was monotheistic, while Mithraism, though it had a supreme Being in the background, was overloaded with hundreds of purely imaginary lesser deities.

An elementary fact of history.—One important if elementary fact must be noted—Judaism and Christianity were both unique religions in the Roman Empire, and therefore cannot have been in any important

particular derived from those which were not unique. We have already touched on the unique character of Judaism in connection with the Old Testament. Christianity was unique in the following respects:

(1) It was the only religion which claimed to be universal, and which had neither images of God, nor a mythology of subordinate gods, nor sacrifice.

(2) It was the only religion, except Judaism, which refused to tolerate other religions, and was wholly exclusive.

(3) It was the only religion which preached a genuine historical incarnation, and which contained in a rational and historical form the satisfaction of all the true aspirations of paganism.

For these reasons, and because it preached on reasonable grounds the

brotherhood of man, it survived. But for a long time Christians were mis understood Because they had no images, and because they denied the other gods, and because women were as welcome at their worship as men, they were accused of atheism and immorality. Because they claimed Christianity to be the true religion for all mankind, they did not receive the tolerance which was allowed to Judaism as a national "superstition." Christianity moved at first along a stony path—misunderstood, lonely, exclusive. What little it did borrow from paganism was borrowed long after the New Testament had fixed for ever its essential features.

X

EVOLUTION AND ATONEMENT

WE may readily grant the proofs of our animal origin, and as readily abandon the early chapters of Genesis, regarded either as history or science. The question is whether the acceptance of the theory of evolution compels us to believe that there is no such thing as human sin, and no such thing as divine forgiveness.

The argument is that if man evolved from the animal, the first man cannot have been better than us, he must have been worse; because his passions were stronger and his

power of control more rudimentary. Further, if we evolved from the animal by slow degrees, at what stage did the spirit enter, and the animal become a man? Again, if man was never innocent, and never had the chance to be innocent, how can he be held responsible for sin?

"Oh Thou who man of baser earth didst
make,
And who with Eden didst devise the snake,
For all the sin with which the face of man
Is blackened, man's forgiveness give—and
take!"

We cannot hope to explain everything in the world, because we do not know enough about it. We can't say exactly when the spirit entered man. Perhaps the spirit was in the ape, and even in the first living cell that appeared upon the earth, but only became articulate when the animal

organism reached the stage that it reached with the first man. We cannot say how innocent or how guilty the first man was. After all, guilt is not judged by an external standard, but by a balancing of achievement and opportunity. Sin in one man is not sin in another. Sin is failure to make the best of what one has, the failure to progress. The sinners in the Gospels are the men who, like the Pharisees, are content with the measure of respectability that they possess, and are not hungry for something better. The publican was inferior to the Pharisee if judged by a fixed standard of morality; but the fact that he was dissatisfied with himself, while the Pharisee was satisfied, made him the more beloved by God.

We know for an absolute fact that

we are not as good as we might be, and that with more faith and love and courage we might be far better than we are. We cannot afford to neglect these facts of experience, because we cannot find the corresponding biological facts which would explain them scientifically.

We know for a fact of experience that confession to God, combined with prayer for help and faith, enable us to overcome sin We know for a fact that if Christ had never died upon the cross He would not have the power to help us that He has. We know for a fact that, however much we may get over our sin, we cannot undo all its effects; and that, since we cannot bear the whole burden of our own sins, we must, if our forgiveness is to prevail, help to bear the burden of other people's

sins. We may not be able to say exactly how it is done; but we do know that suffering which is unde-

served has redemptive power. And if this fact is opposed to strict justice, it is essential to brotherly love among men.

It is facts such as these—facts of experience—that are the most important and the surest facts in life; and it is on them that our religion must be built up. The man who will not believe what he knows from experience to be true, and will not attempt what he knows in his heart to be right, because his intellect cannot find the exact reason why such things are true and right, is making his intellect a master when it was meant to be a servant. He is missing freedom, the freedom of the spirit.